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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000375

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: ANOTHER VIEW INTO THE KALEIDOSCOPE

Classified By: CDA RICHARD E. HOAGLAND: 1.4 (B), (D).

¶1. (S) SUMMARY: According to a nearly two-decade Western observer and insider,

-- Foreign Minister Meredov's role has become more complicated because he has made some powerful enemies in the past year, and because Berdimuhamedov allegedly relies on him now less for advice because he feels more secure in his presidency;

-- President Berdimuhamedov's lack of discipline over the his ministries appears similar to what happened in former President Niyazov's first years;

-- The Ministry of Education cooperates only minimally with the EU because of the powerful anti-Western Director for International Relations; and

-- Turkmen officials once trained by the KGB in the late years of the Soviet Union might now be cooperating directly with Russia in its desire to create an exclusive sphere of influence in Central Asia. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Charge met with EU-TACIS Adviser Michael Wilson (protect throughout) on March 25 for his views on the current state of play in Turkmenistan, because Wilson is the longest-serving and arguably best plugged-in Western diplomat in Ashgabat.

FOREIGN MINISTER'S ROLE HAS BECOME MORE COMPLICATED

¶3. (C) Wilson agreed Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov appears in public to be de facto number two in the government, if for no other reason than he takes protocol precedence when the government is seen in public. In fact, Wilson argued, his role has become more complicated. In the first six months after his inauguration, the inexperienced and insecure Berdimuhamedov relied "almost passively" on Meredov for all kinds of advice. But now that he's had a year of travel and foreign leaders beating a path to his

doorstep, he's "feeling increasingly worldly and secure" and is making many more of his own "snap decisions." Further, Meredov was understood to advise Berdimuhamedov for the first six months most strongly on social-sector and foreign-affairs issues, but then started branching out into personnel questions, including in the power ministries. Wilson alleged several Ministry of National Security and Ministry of Interior senior officials were fired at Meredov's urging, which created for him some very powerful enemies.

¶4. (C) Asked if Meredov is pro-Russia, pro-West, or simply a nationalist, Wilson replied as he has before by reminding that Meredov studied law for seven years in the Soviet Union.

"That would have been plenty of time for him to be recruited," he quipped. Then he added, "In fact, no one knows if Meredov is really their boy. Beneath his relatively smooth surface, he has the extreme secretiveness and slyness of a survivor. In the end, maybe that's who he is -- maybe Meredov is Meredov's boy."

IS HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF?

¶5. (C) Wilson worried that Berdimuhamedov may be repeating one of former President Niyazov's initial mistakes. For the first several years of independence, and Wilson was here during that time, Niyazov was fairly open and outward looking, and gave relatively free rein to his ministers. Niyazov cut deals with a number of minor Western investors and then came to feel burned by them. His ministers created fiefdoms, and more than one became a grossly corrupt petty tyrant. Wilson argued that the ministries might once again be on the same trajectory because Berdimuhamedov doesn't

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micromanage the way Niyazov did. Especially in the ministries' multiple construction projects the graft is exploding, and there are increasing reports of high-handed abuse of the population, especially in the provinces. Wilson said he's not overly optimistic Berdimuhamedov will find a happy balance between discipline that requires correct behavior and oppression, especially because he lacks highly experienced professional advisors, except for the core still in the Presidential Apparatus who served under Niyazov.

EDUCATION COOPERATION

¶6. (C) Wilson lamented the lack of cooperation from the Ministry of Education (MoE). Since the beginning of this calendar year, higher-education rectors have recommended 46 Turkmenistanis to participate in EU educational exchange programs. The MoE approved only 13, 11 of them men. The EU-TACIS office plans to conduct a one-day seminar for the MoE on April 1 to present EU educational cooperation and exchange programs. Wilson asked MoE for approval to invite representatives of all major donors. MoE Director of International Relations Nury Bayramov told Wilson he would consider the list of donors, but made clear from the beginning, "The Americans are not welcome."

KGB SLEEPERS

¶7. (S) Wilson averred Bayramov, who has also been the bete noire of the U.S. Embassy for education cooperation, is a former Soviet KGB officer whom Moscow runs. (COMMENT: Whenever we bring up any problem with U.S. education programs, or for that matter the Ashgabat International School, with Foreign Ministry Americas Director Serdar Bashimov, he screws up his face and jots on his notepad, "Russia!" END COMMENT.) Wilson agreed there is no special evidence that the Ministry of National Security is cooperating any more closely with Russia's intelligence agencies than they did under Niyazov, which was a rather arms-length relationship. But he argued that a number of Turkmen whom the KGB trained toward the end of the Soviet Union, and who didn't necessarily enter Turkmenistan's Ministry of National Security after independence, might now

be cooperating directly with Russian intelligence. He put Bayramov in that category.

18. (C) COMMENT: Wilson was Turkmenistan's first Western adviser after independence, and for several years had free run of the Cabinet of Ministers. Throughout the years, he has built and maintained close relations with a number of Turkmen who are now in high positions, as well as with business people and diplomats throughout the former Soviet Union, especially in Moscow. While we do not always agree with all his analyses, we judge he is one voice almost always worth considering. END COMMENT.  
HOAGLAND